



A broader look at terror management, death, and belief in the supernatural

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A broader look at terror management, death, and belief in the supernatural

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In their masterfully comprehensive book, Jong and Halberstadt (2016) provide a compelling account of the links between religious belief and death anxiety. The topic of the book is, as the authors rightfully note, complex. But despite this complexity and grandness, the authors clearly describe what is and what is not known from the empirical literature. The book should no doubt be a central work in the libraries of scholars who are interested in the existential roots of religious and supernatural belief. At the same, however, the thoroughness of this book makes the crafting of an interesting commentary a bit difficult. What else could possibly be brought to bear on the central question that is the focus of this inquiry? As an active Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) researcher myself, I believe the authors did an appropriate job interpreting and reviewing the critical research linking terror management motives to religious outcomes. Rather than critically arguing with the authors' key points, I found myself agreeing with much of what they presented and, most importantly, the conclusions that they drew. My commentary therefore focuses on some of the broader issues of a terror management account of existential motivation and consequently introduces potentially more nuances to an already nuanced investigation of death anxiety and religion.

At a fundamental level, the difficulty the authors face in using terror management theory as a vehicle to answer direct questions about the link between death and religion is that terror management theory is a much broader explanatory framework. The theory argues that culturally derived beliefs of many kinds function existentially to alleviate the potential negative psychological consequences of being aware of mortality. Religion, from a terror management perspective, is but one of the many belief structures used to mitigate existential concerns. This broader view introduces additional ambiguity into some of the analyses presented by the authors. As one example, even though Jong and Halberstadt's conclusions about death anxiety and religious beliefs generally cohere with terror management theorizing, such correlations are conceptually difficult to interpret in the absence of considering other belief structures. People low in explicit religious belief may be low in death anxiety because they possess faith in other existentially comforting systems of belief. It is not religious disbelief, *per se*, that is providing existential protection, but rather the integrity of some other meaning-providing framework. The point here, which the authors briefly allude to, is that the management of death concerns, from a terror management perspective, results from an incredibly flexible and diverse psychological response. Religion is only a single weapon in the arsenal that people, even those who are religious, have at their disposal.

Building from this point, the research linking mortality salience to explicit reports of death anxiety may be brought into sharper focus. The authors note that successful demonstrations of this link typically involve moderating variables, such as Routledge and Juhl's (2010) finding that people low in meaning in life report greater death anxiety following a typical mortality salience induction, or Abeyta, Juhl, and Routledge's (2014) finding that mortality salience decreases distally measured death anxiety only among people low in self-esteem. From a terror management perspective, these findings align with theorizing about the functional importance of self-esteem and meaning for managing the negative consequences of death-related concerns. Other findings make similar points. For instance, Vess, Routledge, Landau, and Arndt (2009) showed that people who do not readily engage with clearly structured knowledge about the world (i.e., those low in personal need for structure) experience deficits in meaning in life following mortality salience. Such findings illustrate that the integrity of key psychological structures (self-esteem, meaning, coherence) posited to keep death concerns at bay is critical for understanding when death thoughts will trigger anxieties about death, as well as other downstream negative consequences for psychological health.

So where does religion fit into this discussion? One way to perhaps think about these findings is to consider a more multilevel view of terror management. That is, according to terror management theory, existential concerns about death do not motivate *specific* religious beliefs (or any other belief) *per se*. Rather, the theory posits that concerns about death motivate individuals to pursue self-esteem and meaningful views of the world and one's self. These relatively abstract psychological structures would thus be located quite closely to death concerns in the model, and more robustly account for people's ability to regulate death anxieties and aspects of psychological functioning in the face of death thoughts. The particular beliefs and behaviors that generate self-esteem and meaning, such as religion, fame, and relationships, on the other hand, are consequently located at a higher level in the model as they represent the many ways that people could enhance self-esteem and a sense of meaning in life. Of course, the one distinction between religion and other beliefs that confer self-esteem and meaning in life is that religion offers particularly explicit paths to a *literal* afterlife. This may be why terror management scholars and the theorists who developed the ideas that led to terror management (e.g., Becker) have sometimes argued that religion may be the most effective type of belief for combating the negative consequences of death awareness. Yet, even here, non-religious belief systems may provide the same type of function. Advances in genome research have indeed laid a foundation for a belief in the possibility of "immortality" through secular (scientific) avenues. All of this is to say that the authors' tentative conclusions about the merits of a terror management "worldview" account, relative to the more restrictive thanatocentric accounts of religion, seem logically consistent with a broader view of the conceptual foundation for terror management theory. Terror management theory makes no

explicit claims about the primacy or universality of religious belief (as defined by the authors) and, as such, the lack of definitive evidence linking religious belief to avowed non-believers in the face of death would be coherently predicted by the theory.

A broader consideration of outcomes that border on the “religious” might also be worth considering. The authors define religion, effectively in my opinion, as “belief in supernatural agents and the phenomena associated with those beliefs, such as rituals, social structures, and emotional and perceptual experiences” (p. 3). They further define supernatural agents as agents who can overcome intuitive expectations about the limits of reality. Despite this broad definition, much of the discussion centers on more conventional notions of religious faith, even though other belief structures are relevant. Indeed, if one assumes that religious belief is a functional response to concerns about death-transcendent meaning, then focusing on a broader spectrum of supernatural beliefs could be useful. This is the approach recently taken by Clay Routledge and his colleagues. In one set of studies, Routledge, Roylance, and Abeyta (2017) demonstrated that direct threats to meaning – which we know leaves people vulnerable to death anxiety (Routledge & Juhl, 2010) – lead people to show greater belief in miraculous events caused by supernatural agents. Here is an example of one such event, taken directly from Routledge, Roylance, et al. (2017).

(Tony Davis of Los Angeles describing his experience after being shot in a mugging-gone-wrong)

I started to float towards these clouds. These clouds opened up and through these clouds, I saw this huge city. It was so strange, but the city was beautiful. I saw these colors I've never seen before in my life ... these strange, glowing colors, radiant colors, just glowing out of this huge city. All of a sudden this voice said, “It's not yet your time. Go back.” I'm like, “No.” It said my name. “Tony, your work is not yet done. Go back.”

Although this example never directly mentions conventional notions of God or religion, the experience no doubt “feels” religious and provides a nice illustration of a methodological device for capturing belief in the supernatural. Building on similar ideas, Routledge, Abeyta, and Roylance (2017) have shown that participants low in religiosity (atheists and agnostics) are more likely to harbor belief in extraterrestrials. I think it is reasonable to suggest that belief in aliens can be religious in nature; the infamous cult in the dissonance theory literature referenced in Jong and Halberstadt's book certainly echoes that notion. I also believe that Routledge and colleagues' approach demonstrates an important point about “religious” belief. Although “non-religious” people may be reluctant to embrace explicit beliefs about God (or conventional notions of religions), they may nevertheless be very willing to express explicit beliefs that are in many ways “religious” when the need for meaning is elevated. Such responses may be consistent with the mixed evidence that Jong and Halberstadt review in regards to explicit and implicit religious beliefs among those low in religiosity. The implicit measures may be picking up on a more general tendency to find meaning in the supernatural, which might only show up in specific types of explicit “religious” beliefs.

Finally, while I appreciate the psychological approach adopted by Jong and Halberstadt, I think it might be important to consider the possibility that modern psychological research on the link between religion and death anxiety may not directly speak to the size of this association throughout human history. Terror management theory specifies the features of belief systems, both religious and secular, that function to thwart concerns about death. The centrality of religious and non-religious belief systems in providing these functions to people may be a more sociological, anthropological, or historical question, rather than merely a psychological one. That is, much has been made of western societies becoming less and less religious in recent times. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that death anxiety should be more of an issue. It might simply mean that people are increasingly relying on non-religious worldviews for their terror management needs. In times past, when religious beliefs were indeed more central (or perhaps even fundamental), one might expect to see consistent and robust links between death anxiety and religious belief. The centrality of particular types of beliefs for terror management is, admittedly, a question that the theory may not be able to fully address with the methods typically employed in social psychology experiments. However, even against this possible backdrop, the work linking meaning concerns (which are, of course, tied to

death concerns) to belief in supernatural phenomena outside traditional views of religion might offer evidence for more fundamental motivational and cognitive processes that transcend historical trends in explicit religiosity. Regardless, the well-conceived and supported foundation provided by Jong and Halberstadt in this book will likely prove to be a useful starting point for such future inquiries.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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On setting up straw gods?

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Not everyone believes in Gods, Devils, heavens and hells, or eternal souls, but that doesn't mean they don't believe in anything. In New Zealand, analysis of large numbers of New Zealanders' beliefs suggests that only a small proportion (12% or so) can be thought of as "Religious Exclusives" – people who believe in traditional religious notions but no other supernatural or paranormal phenomena (Wilson, Bulbulia, & Sibley, 2014). That said, a further 9% may be thought of as "Undifferentiated Believers" (who believe in religion *and* most other things) and 13% as "New Age Spiritualists" who report the highest levels of belief in ideas of non-religious spirituality, as well as high levels of traditional religious belief. The remaining two-thirds of the population are either "Moderate Agnostics" or "Undifferentiated Sceptics." Aarnio and Lindeman (2007) report a cluster analysis of a large sample of Finnish participants, identifying 49% as "Skeptics," 35% as "Religious," 12% "Paranormal Believers," and about 3% "Double Believers." Both New Zealand and Finland, it appears, are more secular than religious. I'll come back to this.

But, first things first. What a fantastic one-stop shop Jong and Halberstadt (2016) provide those with a scholarly interest in religion, a scholarly interest in death, as well as the generally morbidly inclined. Want a summary of measures of religion and religiosity? Check. A survey of the empirical